A WORLD AT THEIR FINGERTIPS

Mort Weisinger

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Because of one man's indomitable perseverance, the road of learning is no longer closed to the blind

A World at Their fingertips

by MORT WEISINGER

THE GIANT RED firecracker looked like a dud. So Arthur Sabados, a ten-year-old boy, celebrating Independence Day in his hometown of New Haven, Connecticut, stooped eagerly to relight it. A split second later there was the explosion, and when the boy regained consciousness he was in a hospital, blinded for life.

But readjustment to a life without eyes came quickly to this boy. While his face was still swathed in bandages his nurse brought him a small, thick card, the surface of which was highly embossed with tiny raised dots. She explained that it was the alphabet, devised by another sightless youth in far-off France, who had spent a lifetime perfecting a system of reading and writing for the blind.

"That boy's name was Louis Braille," the nurse told Arthur. She guided his index finger over the upper left-hand corner of the card and asked, "What do you feel?"

"I feel a little pimple," the lad replied.

"Good! One pimple means the letter "A," the nurse informed him.

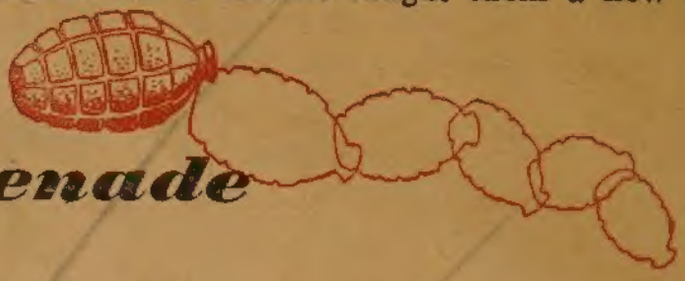
Two more tiny mounds, one above the other, a quarter-inch to the right was B. Two pimples side by side was C. There was a different combination of dots for every letter in the alphabet. Getting to Q, Arthur discovered it consisted of five pimples—three on the left, two on the right.

Within a month Arthur, a seventh-grader in a public school, had memorized the symbols of every letter on the card, as well as those representing numerals, punctuation and contractions. Six dots, for example, stood for the often-used word "for." Once he had mastered the Braille alphabet, Arthur found it a passport to a new life.

As the boy progressed with his studies, mathematics became a game. Geometry, especially, was fun with three-dimensional triangles and cubes to work with.

Soon Arthur found that if he didn't press too hard on the embossed dots he could read about thirty words a minute. He learned that cold cream made his fingers more sensitive. Arthur's reading speed soon increased to eighty

The Japs once learned American baseball but a Marine taught them a new trick



The Sixth Grenade

by WILLIAM R. MICKA

BEFORE HE joined the United States Marine Corps, seventeen year old Johnny Spillane of Waterbury, Connecticut, was playing semi-pro baseball. He was a husky right-hander and the major leagues were already watching him. His best beat was shortstop and no ball was too hot for him to handle.

The Marines trained Johnny to drive an amphibious tractor. He went through months of rigid training in the States. Overseas, at Gavutu, Tannembogo, and Guadalcanal he brought in ammunition under fire and he helped to remove his wounded buddies. Then he rested and waited in New Zealand. It was a soft life, but Johnny didn't know he was being trained for one of the worst battles in Marine Corps history—Tarawa, tough and bloody Tarawa!

Corporal Johnny Spillane was in the first assault wave that hit the savage beach at Tarawa. His lumbering amtrac plowed through the water, while enemy shells sought to tear it to shreds.

Once on the beach the crew on Johnny's amtrac opened up with their .30 and .50 calibre guns. Johnny held a forward position, with most of the troops to the rear of the amtrac. Suddenly a Jap hand grenade clumped on the deck, sizzling with pent-up death. Johnny dived on the grenade and winged it back at the Japs without so much as standing up. As he drew breath and laughed a little at the game of war another grenade bounced near him. Once again Johnny sent the deadly sphere back to its owners. This time the chattering of the machine-gun on the seawall ceased.

Well, that was something accomplished, Johnny thought—a Jap nest wiped out with their own grenades. But triumph didn't last long. A third grenade clattered at his feet. With his old shortstop speed he hurled this one, too, back at the stubborn Japs. Johnny was pushing his luck now, and he knew it. Twice more grenades lobbed in at his crew and twice more he sped them back. And then came the sixth grenade, hissing, like a snake about to strike.

Johnny had his hand on it ready for the life-saving heave, but it was too late. The explosion shook the amtrac from its treads. Pain shattered the gallant corporal. Shrapnel pierced his helmet and tore his body. And then he saw, in a furnace of agony, that he would never throw another grenade, never another baseball with his old speed and accuracy. His right hand was missing. But the men behind Johnny Spillane were safe. They went on to carry vengeance to the enemy. They went on to take Tarawa and to victory.

words a minute. And as he grew older, he became particularly appreciative of humorous stories with surprise endings. A finger can't take in a sentence at a glance, as the normal eye can, and suspense is maintained until the very last word. So the unusual story "twist" comes as a terrific impact to Braille readers.

In time he learned Grade Two Braille, a difficult but compact shorthand that saved reading and writing time. Later, at an Eastern university, he took special courses in journalism. Like scores of other blind students, he read Braille textbooks with his toes, simultaneously typing his homework on a specially constructed typewriter with Braille keys. Eventually he married, got a job in an advertising agency and settled down to a well-rounded life.

Arthur Sabados' story is typical of the thousands who have used the Braille system as stepping stones to success. Alec Templeton, 36-year-old champion in the realm of music from Bach to boogie-woogie, is another who obtained his entire general education through Braille, for he was born blind.

YET NOT ALWAYS did the sightless have access to the pursuit of happiness. A little over a century ago more than 95 per cent of the world's blind were paupers, beggars, or confined to institutions.

That these pitiful conditions no longer exist is due in great measure to Louis Braille, born in 1809 at Coupvray, France, the son of a poor harness maker. Blinded at the age of three, he was enrolled in the Paris Institution for Blind children when he was ten. There, older students frightened the impressionable boy with predictions that he would become a beggar. As a result he became passionately studious and mastered the violincello, reading the notes with his fingertips from sheets of music that had been highly embossed.

But Louis Braille thirsted for knowledge. He wanted to be able to read books, to learn things that shrouded him from the outside world. As he grew older, Braille wondered whether a practical system of reading could ever be invented for the blind. Grappling with the problem, he went to fantastic lengths. Once, daring the unknown horrors of the outside world, he slipped from the Institution and begged in the streets of Paris. With the few coins he collected, he purchased a supply of leather thongs. These he wound into a series of knots, so that one knot would stand for the letter A, two for B, and so on. For a while Louis amused fellow students, teaching them how to send simple messages this way; but the system failed because it was too cumbersome.

His exceptional aptitude as a student finally earned him the position of instructor in the Institution. But it was the simple parlor game of dominoes which finally gave young Braille the answer to the problem that obsessed him. Counting the dotlike indentations on each domino with the fingertips was a simple and rapid process. Recalling how easy it was to read embossed musical notes, he reasoned that the dots of the domino could be detected more easily if they were *raised* in-

stead of *depressed*. Then if the domino dots could be arranged into various combinations so that each represented a letter of the alphabet he would have a practical system.

Inspired, Braille went to work, and finally perfected the code that most blind people use today. Yet, after months of labor, he knew no reward for his great invention. Officials at the Institution refused to listen to a word in its favor. "A separate alphabet for the blind would set them still further apart from the normal world," they argued, and the Braille system was forbidden to be taught.

THE OFFICIALS, however, had not reckoned with the indomitable spirit of Louis Braille. Secretly, he held classes in his room, teaching the new code to students. Next, he contrived a device that would teach them to write. This consisted of two zinc plates joined together with a hinge so that one fitted over the other. The upper plate was perforated with lines of small squarish openings. In the lower plate, under each opening, was a set of indentations corresponding to the six dots of the domino.

The writer merely had to insert a sheet of paper between the two plates and, working along from opening to opening in the upper plate, punch the paper down with a blunt awl into the indentations in the lower plate, which in turn spelled out words in Braille. There was just one drawback—the fact that the raised dots appeared on the bottom side of the paper made it necessary for the writer to work from right to left, so that when the paper was turned over the elevated dots could be read from left to right. Consequently, each letter had to be written backward. Yet so eager were Braille's pupils that this obstacle proved only a minor handicap.

As an instructor, Braille had a staff of scribes, or secretaries, and he now took the next step to bring further learning to the blind. Enlisting the aid of a few sympathetic professors, he had them dictate aloud from the Bible and some of the classics, while his scribes punched out the words on paper. At the end of several years, a fair-sized library for the sightless had been built up.

Thirty years old now, and a full professor, Braille's health began to fail. His lungs were ravaged by consumption, and he had to give up teaching five years later and accept retirement within the Institution.

Yet, even then he continued to fight for the adoption of his system. And a kindly fate finally granted him success. During the last graduation exercises that Braille attended at the school, the first prize for achievement went to one of his students, and as the boy stepped forward to receive his award he announced in ringing tones that he would not accept the prize unless full homage was accorded the man who had been his teacher.

Only then did the director acknowledge his mistake and proclaim in an official speech the advantages of the Braille method, promising that henceforward all students' books would be printed by it. Breathing his last a few days later, in his 43rd year, Louis Braille

smiled peacefully and murmured, "Let there be light . . ."

Today, almost every well-known book, fiction and non-fiction, has been published in Braille. The system has even been adapted to Chinese and there are also Braille magazines. The Braille Bible is in 21 volumes. During the 26 years of its existence, the Braille Institute of America, Inc. in Los Angeles has distributed nearly eighteen thousand of these Bibles to the blind in all parts of the world.

Like the Morse code, the Braille system has been given free to the world, and no one derives any profit from its use. The Federal government, through the Library of Congress, annually appropriates 500 thousand dollars for Braille books, talking books (phonograph records) and slow revolving machines for playing the records. These are distributed without charge to the blind by 27 Braille libraries scattered throughout the nation.

Blind readers are not required to go to these libraries to borrow or return books. They simply send lists of desired titles and all reading matter is sent parcel post—free.

The government also grants the American Printing House for the Blind at Louisville, Kentucky, 125 thousand dollars annually to supply Braille books, talking books and tangible apparatus for education of the blind. Once a month, the American Foundation for the Blind at 15 West 16th Street, New York City, supplies free book reviews in Braille. They also list books which are available.

In the same way, the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind at Watertown, Mass., sponsor a "Map of the Month." Watches with special Braille surfaces are given free to blinded servicemen by the American Foundation for the Blind.

Because blind Louis Braille was a man of clear inner vision, today the sightless literally have the world at their fingertips.

Fish Stories

PORPOISES' WHISKERS are not vanity. Acting like pressure needles, they tell the porpoise when its maximum depth has been attained . . . Sharks shed their teeth. Originating in the rear part of the mouth, the teeth work forward until they reach the outer edge, where they're discarded. New rows move up constantly to replace losses.

—SIMPSON M. RITTER

SHOCKING IS the word for the South American electric eel. Two-fifths of its body, from three to six feet in length, consists of a 240-cell battery of electricity-producing organs. By bringing its head and tail in contact with a small fish, the eel can deliver a paralyzing blow. Indians who first sought these eels for food were knocked down or had their arms benumbed for hours from the force of the shock. This isn't surprising when you consider that the ordinary electric light bulb operates on sixty watts, while the eel can momentarily produce more than two thousand watts.

—CHARLES F. KETTERING, NBC

Our Human Comedy

What makes for laughter? Amusing trifles from the everyday, remarked one famous philosopher. We agree and so gathered for your pleasure the following tidbits

AN IRANIAN air mission flew in to Washington recently for a series of informal discussions about the post-war aviation set-up. The Iranian ministry sent a high dignitary to greet his countrymen, of course, and the Air Transport Command was represented by Major General George. The Iranian mistook the American for General Marshall, and so addressed him three or four times. Finally General George decided to set him right. "The name, sir," he said somewhat testily, "is *George*."

The Iranian smiled happily, bowed from the waist and responded, "Please call *me* Mohammed."

—BENNETT CERF
in *The Saturday Review of Literature*

AT ONE OF OUR Pacific air bases, a Marine general was striding down the long rows of planes lined up for full dress inspection. Most of the craft were decorated with various slogans, nicknames and pictures. One in particular boasted a painting of a gorgeous blonde—but she was in a very startling state of undress.

The general frowned, threw back his shoulders and bellowed, "Put some clothes on that woman!"

As soon as the inspection was over the plane crew went into a huddle on dress designing. One hour later, just as the general had ordered, the beautiful blonde was given a dress—of cellophane!

—LT. R. J. MACQUAID

A SUPERFORTRESS crew member, recently returned from China, tells of a strange superstition among the Chinese near his base.

He was standing on the field watching one of the big B-29s being readied for flight when he noticed several coolies crouched along the runway. Just as the bomber sped toward them for the takeoff, one coolie raced madly across its path. The horrified American screamed a warning, but the words were scarcely out of his mouth when he realized the plane was airborne, and the coolie, unhurt, was calmly watching it.

"What's the big idea?" shouted

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